

## **The First Female Engineer in Indiana** By Samantha Mesterharm

Do you know the name of the woman who was the first female graduate with a degree in engineering in the state of Indiana? Here's a hint: she was also the first woman to graduate from Purdue University with a degree in engineering.

When Indiana became a state in 1819, women were not allowed to vote, very few went to college and none of them became engineers. There were colleges for teachers that accepted woman, but others did not accept women students at all. In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, a law that helped create Purdue. In 1875, when Purdue started its first classes, there were no women students at all. In 1884, Purdue's first African American graduate, Robert Lewis, earned his degree in engineering. There were still no woman engineers, not just at Purdue, but anywhere in Indiana.

Then, in 1897 Martha Stevens became the first female graduate with a degree in engineering in Indiana and from Purdue. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering. She earned a Masters degree in 1898. How did she do this in a time when women did not have the same rights as men, when many women did not even go to college and when women were expected to get married and have children? This accomplishment makes Martha Stevens a pivotal person in Indiana's past and an important part of women's history, even if she is not well known for her accomplishment.

Martha's father, Moses Stevens, was a mathematics professor at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana then at Purdue University. Martha grew up on the campus and probably learned that math and science are not hard subjects if you study. Being so close to other engineers when she was younger probably made her think "If they can do it, so can I!"

After earning her engineering degree, Martha Stevens became a teacher of mathematics at Earlham College, just like her dad. In 1907, she married John Bibb Mills. She died in 1918 and did not get to see women win the right to vote.

Like Martha Stevens, I want to be a teacher when I grow up. I want to be an art teacher. I never understood why my parents told me I could go to any college as long as I studied math and chemistry. I did not think these were important subjects to study to be an artist. My parents have explained that Purdue is a great place to study, especially if you want to be an engineer. I never understood how this would help me be an art teacher.

I attended a Woman in Engineering event at Purdue to earn a Girl Scout Badge. Before I went, I thought engineers drove trains. When we went as a family to Purdue football games, I always saw a train. My dad explained what Boilermaker means but I still thought an engineer drove trains. During that day of Women in Engineering, I learned about engineers and what they do. Some do drive trains, but there are many different types of engineers. I also learned that the number of girls who become engineers is growing but it was not always so easy for them. That day I learned about Martha Stevens and that she was the first female engineer in Indiana and with a degree from Purdue.

I feel Martha Stevens is an important figure in Women's History in Indiana because she was the first to earn an engineering degree in Indiana in a time when women did not have many rights or choices. I am inspired to want to become an engineer because she made history, even if very few people actually know about her. Because of her story, I think I can still grow up and be an art teacher. If I have a degree in engineering I can be anything I want and who knows, I may even invent a new type of paint or a new way to dry clay. I did not know this was even possible until I learned about my Hoosier Heroine, Martha Stevens.